

THE SILENT VOICE IN THE NAPLAN DEBATE: EXPLORING CHILDREN'S LIVED EXPERIENCES OF THE TESTS

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Abstract

This paper examines primary school-aged children's lived experiences of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) tests. NAPLAN emulates the neoliberal accountability agendas of English and US education systems, with results published on the My School website. Research on the impact of NAPLAN to date has focused predominantly on schools, school leaders and teachers; however there is a lacuna in the literature pertaining to children. In this study, 100 children across 5 classrooms within 2 schools serving different socioeconomic status (SES) communities drew a picture about their experience and wrote about their drawing after completing the tests. Focus group discussions and classroom observations were also conducted. Inductive, thematic analysis of the data revealed emotion as the most dominant category. Negative responses were most prevalent among children in year 7 who often failed to see any purpose in the tests, but most severe in responses from students with learning difficulties. The focus group discussion with the year 3 children in the higher SES school provided evidence that this group is most likely to perceive NAPLAN as high-stakes. Persuasive evidence suggesting linkages between negative emotional responses and poor test performance indicates outcomes which are counterproductive to the central aim of NAPLAN, which is to improve learning outcomes.

Introduction

This paper describes the key findings of a study which explored primary school-aged children's lived experiences of NAPLAN. It forms part of a larger study which also examined the impact of NAPLAN on teachers and their professional practices, which incorporated the perceptions and experiences of a range of contextual participants, including parents. The study refined previous approaches to researching with children by incorporating the context in which the children's responses occurred. It is pertinent to recognise that children's responses do not occur within a vacuum.

NAPLAN involves full-cohort, yearly standardised testing of literacy and numeracy skills for all Australian students in years 3, 5, 7 and 9. The tests were first implemented in 2008 and in 2010 results were first published against national averages, benchmarks and the average of approximately 60 'statistically similar schools' as determined by an Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage (ICSEA). The Australian Curriculum and Reporting Authority (ACARA) maintains that ICSEA, a scale that represents levels of educational advantage and implicitly disadvantage, is a means of enabling meaningful comparisons across schools serving similar socio-economic status (SES) communities.

Beginning with a summary of the debate surrounding NAPLAN, this paper argues that in the midst of this intense debate it is evident that the voices of the students, who are the ultimate stakeholders of this policy, are obscured. This is followed by a review of the international literature pertaining to students' responses to high stakes testing regimes. Australian literature which has addressed the impact of NAPLAN on students via teachers' perceptions and accounts of student and parent reports is also discussed. It then proceeds by outlining the methods used in the study, which is followed by data

analysis and the findings of the study. It concludes that the prevailing negativity among responses indicates that NAPLAN has a detrimental impact on the well-being of many students and further, is a counterproductive strategy for improving learning outcomes.

The NAPLAN debate

There is a great deal of heated and often contentious debate surrounding NAPLAN. On one hand, following the global trend towards the political view that school improvement requires expectations of accountability as reflected in test scores, Australian politicians and media present NAPLAN as a means to 'improving learning outcomes for all Australians (MCEETYA, 2009) in order to 'build a high-productivity, high-participation economy' (ALP, 2010, p. 5). Amidst concerns regarding international research which has revealed unintended consequences associated with high-stakes testing, ACARA maintains that NAPLAN has been designed as a low-stakes test. During the Senate Inquiry into NAPLAN, ACARA stressed that 'Australia has not made the mistakes of the UK and USA of having those extreme high-stakes consequences' (Senate, 2010, p. 65).

On the other hand, researchers have raised concerns regarding the validity and reliability of results (Hardy & Boyle, 2011; Wu, 2010) and argue that a combination of the ways in which the data are being used and mediatisation have launched NAPLAN on a high-stakes trajectory. Evidence within current literature suggests that as a result, Australia is now also experiencing the unintended consequences of high-stakes testing. These include the distortion and corruption of data (Lingard & Sellar, 2013), and a negative impact on the teaching and learning process (Comber, 2011, 2012; Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012), resulting in impoverished learning outcomes (Caldwell, 2010). While the views of school leaders and teachers are not uniformly negative (Dulfer, Polesel, & Rice, 2012), many cite serious concerns regarding the limitations of the tests and the detrimental impact upon 'curriculum breadth, pedagogy, staff morale, schools' capacity to attract and retain students and student well-being' (Dulfer et al., 2012, p. 31). Adding to this turbulent debate are widespread community misunderstandings of the nature, purpose and effects of NAPLAN. This was acknowledged by the Senate as being the result of the government's poor communication of the intended purpose of the tests (Senate, 2010).

As debate continues to rage, it is evident that 'there has been a pervasive silence around the rights of the child/student and the ways in which they have been positioned by testing and accountability priorities' (Klenowski & Wyatt-Smith, 2012, p. 76). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN CRC) (UN, 1989) was ratified by Australia in December 1990, which imposes a clear legal obligation on States parties to recognise this right and ensure its implementation. However, while 'the right of children to be heard and taken seriously constitutes one of the fundamental values of the Convention' (UN, 2009, p. 5), this right 'continues to be impeded by many long-standing practices and attitudes, as well as political and economic barriers (UN, 2009, p. 6). It is argued here that the continued exclusion of children's accounts of their experiences of the tests simultaneously denies children their rights as established through the UN CRC and fails to account for the ways in which NAPLAN impacts upon the primary stakeholders of this policy.

Background Literature

While research literature pertaining directly to children's lived experiences of test-based accountability regimes remains sparse, the negative impact of such regimes on many students is a strong pattern within the available data, as is the noticeable absence of contrary evidence.

The independent *Cambridge Primary Review* conducted in England in 2009 and published as *Children, Their World, Their Education*, explored children's opinions of their schools and their

learning through submissions and community soundings which involved 19 sessions with 197 children (Alexander, 2010). Data from the submissions revealed that formal assessments weigh heavily on children's minds. When asked what they felt schools should teach, one 11-year-old responded, 'Respect, responsibility and things that will help us pass our SATs' (Alexander, 2010, p. 149). The community soundings provided evidence that the children's views of testing were varied. 'While a few were confident and thought of tests as interesting challenges, others worried that they might do badly' (Alexander, 2010, p. 149). The study also found that the children were 'acutely aware that SAT results were important for their schools and teachers' (Alexander, 2010, p. 149).

In the US, Jones et al (1999) examined the impact of North Carolina's high-stakes accountability regime 'The New ABCs of Public Education' through the perceptions of 236 certified teachers in 16 elementary schools. While 28% of these teachers felt that their students were more prepared for learning and 15% felt their students had more confidence, 61% reported heightened anxiety in their students and 48.5% indicated that this program had 'a negative impact of students' 'love of learning' (Jones et al., 1999, p. 201).

Taking the approach of examining the impact of high-stakes testing on students a step further, to include the students themselves, Wheelock, Haney and Bell (2002) explored middle and high school students' perceptions of high-stakes testing regimes through drawings produced by the students. The responses produced a range of categories, including anxiety, anger, and boredom (Wheelock, Bebell, & Haney, 2002). However, these terms were inferred by the researchers rather than explicitly stated by students (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005).

This approach was refined in Triplett and Barksdale's (2005) *Third through sixth graders' perceptions of high-stakes testing*, which encapsulated the responses of 225 children through a drawing of their testing experience and writing about their drawing on the day immediately after the test. Emotion was identified as the most prevalent category that emerged from the study, with nervousness most frequently discussed by the students. Isolation/ personal inadequacy also predominated, as evidenced in 55 per cent of the children's drawings, in which the children drew themselves as very small. Anger was the focus of many drawings, and some children expressed both their anger and desire to gain power over the situation through the depiction of fire and burning.

Foster (2006) examined the disproportionately negative impact of high stakes testing on students in low SES communities. Through individual and focus group discussions regarding the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test, which dominates the Texas curriculum, it was revealed that 'students believe real learning is being sacrificed for TAKS scores' (Foster, 2006, p. 143).

While no critiques of NAPLAN to date have involved students directly, several studies have examined the impact of the tests on students through teachers' perceptions and accounts of parent and student reports of specific problems associated with the tests.

The *Effects of NAPLAN* (Thompson, 2012) project examined the impact of NAPLAN on schools and classrooms through the perceptions of 961 teachers within Government, Catholic and Independent schools in Western Australia and South Australia who participated in a voluntary online survey. In response to the open ended question 'What, if any, are the negative impacts you have seen in your school/class as a result of NAPLAN?', 51% of teachers reported increased student stress, indicating that NAPLAN is having a significant negative impact upon students. Thompson notes that as the survey was voluntary in nature, care must be taken with the generalisability of the data. However, he draws attention to the significance of the concerns which emerged from the survey 'not just because teachers perceive these effects, but because the findings are consistent with international research about the negative effects of high-stakes testing' (Thompson, 2012, p. 7).

The Whitlam Institute Report *The Experience of Education: The impacts of high stakes testing on*

school students and their families (Dulfer et al., 2012) explored educators' views about NAPLAN through an electronic survey which was sent to all members of the Australian Education and Independent Education Unions in each state. Data pertaining to the impact of the tests on children's health and well-being were drawn from the numbers of students and parents who had directly reported particular problems associated with the NAPLAN tests. These data revealed that while 'participants do not believe that all students regard NAPLAN as a negative experience ... Approximately 90 per cent of respondents stated that at least some students reported feeling stressed' (Dulfer et al., 2012, p. 17). Specific issues pertaining to children's health and well-being included reports of 'physical responses such as crying, sleeplessness and feeling sick, as well as psychological responses such as an inability to cope emotionally, feelings of inadequacy, and concerns about the ways in which others might view them' (Dulfer et al., 2012, p. 17).

The findings of these studies are unquestionably significant as 'teachers are uniquely placed to account for the impacts that NAPLAN is having at the school and classroom level' (Thompson, 2012, p. 1). However the voices of the children, whose perceptions may be vastly different to those of their teachers and/or parents and who are the ultimate stakeholders of this policy, remain absent from the NAPLAN debate.

Project Overview

This study adopted the position that 'participation' is 'less a question of methods and techniques than of attitude' (Gallacher & Gallagher, 2008, p. 511). Gallacher and Gallagher (2008) argue that while 'participation' is generally viewed as a positive attribute of research with children, there has been limited methodological reflection on both the meaning of the term and oft-cited claims made about participatory methods. From this position, participatory methods were understood as a set of 'ongoing processes which include information sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect' (UN, 2009, p. 5) while utilising 'methods that give children shared control of the language and concepts' (Freeman & Mathison, 2009, p. 65).

One hundred children in 5 classrooms encompassing years 3, 5 and 7 across 2 Catholic primary schools serving different SES communities contributed to the study. Catholic schools were chosen for two reasons. Firstly, Catholic schools hold both the average NAPLAN score and ICSEA value (Bonnor, 2010) and therefore afforded the most suitable opportunity to encapsulate a typical situation. Secondly, to explore the extent to which systemic mediation counteracts the potentially negative effects of NAPLAN as described by current literature.

Brisbane Catholic Education (BCE) acknowledges that the basic intention of NAPLAN is to 'provide a common measurement and reporting instrument for all Australian students and schools' (BCE, 2011). However, BCE's emphasis that 'NAPLAN needs to be understood in the context of the richer and more continuous information that schools have about learners' progress and demonstrations of learning' (BCE, 2011), provides a stark contrast to the Queensland Department of Education which promotes NAPLAN as 'an important measure of how all students are performing against national standards' (DET, 2011). BCE's emphasis that NAPLAN results are merely one measure of learning outcomes was evident during the interviews with the Executive Director of BCE, through to the principals and the teachers themselves. It was therefore hypothesised that the pressure on children to perform well in NAPLAN would be less than that experienced in Government schools.

The children contributed to the project in several ways. Firstly, there were invited to draw a picture about their NAPLAN experience. This approach was founded on the premise that the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of children's drawings not only provides a rich entry point for engaging children in issues that are important to them (Mitchell, Theron, Stuart, Smith, & Campbell, 2011), but recognised that 'the limits of [children's] cognition are not defined by the limits of [their] language' (Eisner, 2002, p. 7). Wright (2012) explains that artistic forms of communication are not merely

preverbal or subverbal, but supravverbal, involving 'expressive and symbolic modes of thinking, understanding and communicating in a unique manner' (Wright, 2012, p. 8). She adds that such communication allows people of all ages to surface meaning and psychological moods in metaphoric ways through the use of artistic elements such as colour, shape, line, pencil stroke and texture (Wright, 2012).

Several processes were employed to maximise the likelihood of creating optimal conditions in which the children could 'purposefully bring shape and order to their experience' (Cox, 2005, p. 125). Firstly, in order to eliminate as far as possible any researcher or teacher bias, the instructions were quite open-ended. It is noted that while this would have encouraged some children to pursue personal agendas and interests, others may have felt insecure and drew what they felt their teacher would expect and approve of (Hopperstad, 2010). To avoid this, the students were reassured verbally and in writing that the focus was on the content of their drawing rather than its quality and that their work would be de-identified. Secondly, the children were able to make use of any media they wished (e.g., coloured crayons, coloured pencils, felt-tipped markers, lead pencil, etc.), as 'colour facilitates richer expression and often affords participants a greater sense of satisfaction, both with regard to the process of creating the drawing and the completed product' (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 23).

While drawing is clearly a useful research tool when working with children, it must be 'complemented by methods that encourage collaborative meaning-making and allow the drawer to give voice to what the drawing was intended to convey' (Mitchell et al., 2011, p. 25). The children were therefore also asked to write about their drawing, removing the need to rely solely on the researcher's interpretations (Triplett & Barksdale, 2005). In order to minimise any insecurity associated with the written component of the task, the children were assured both verbally and in writing, that the focus was on the content, not quality of their writing and that their writing would also be de-identified.

Focus group discussions were also held with 4 – 6 children in each class after the completion of the tests. The purpose of these discussions was to explore the children's perceptions of learning experiences in which they felt they learned the best, the extent to which they felt lessons and their teachers changed in the lead-up to the tests, what their parents told them about NAPLAN and what did they think would happen if they did or did not do well. During these discussions, the researcher acted as a moderator, inducing the students to 'express their opinions but with minimum, if any direction' (Yin, 2011, p. 141), in order to 'refrain from assuming that there is shared meaning for words or concepts' (Ellis, 2006, p. 117).

Finally, classroom observations were conducted in each classroom for a 1 ½ - 2 hour block each week, in the lead-up to the tests, during one of the tests, for two weeks after the tests and again for two weeks in October. During these observations, the amount of time spent specifically preparing for NAPLAN was recorded and the frequency of the teachers' use of the word 'NAPLAN' was tallied. This was complemented by recording detailed accounts of the actions and interactions between teachers and students as lessons unfolded, with the aim of creating a vivid image of events taking place (Yin, 2011).

Data Analysis

The process began with an analysis of each child's drawing according to the artistic elements of line, shape, form, colour, texture, proportion and perspective as well as facial expression, body language and metaphorical representations. Adopting the view that the children's drawings and writings constituted a single multimodal act, whereby 'meaning is constituted by its total effects and understood as a complete whole' (Wright, 2010, p. 14), each child's contribution was individually analysed for themes. These themes were grouped together and categorised in order to identify both common and distinct themes between the teachers, year levels and schools, through the dynamic process of constant comparative analysis (Merriam, 1998). This process began with the analysis of initial observations and underwent continual refinement through a combination of inductive category coding and simultaneous comparison (Goetz & LeCompte, 1981) between each class, year level and

school. Similarly, the focus group discussions and classroom observations were analysed for common and distinct words and phrases between the different classes.

Twelve categories which are outlined in the table below emerged from this process.

Table 1

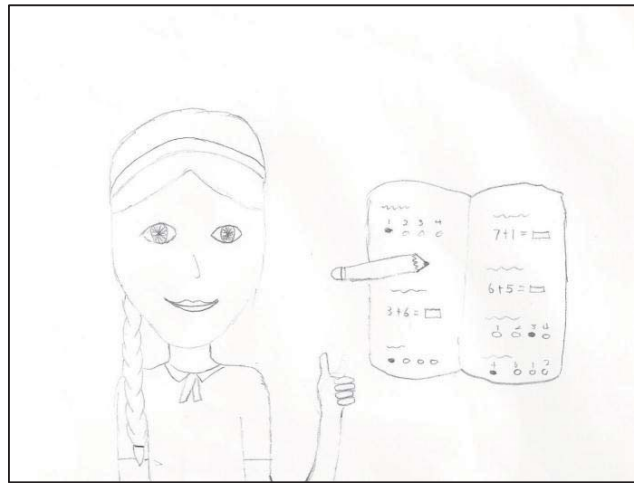
Categories which emerged from the children's drawings and written descriptions

Theme	Description
Emotion	Explicitly represented or expressed positive emotions such as 'happy', 'excited', 'proud' and 'confident' or negative emotions such as 'nervous', 'sad', 'scared' and 'angry'.
Culture of testing	Referred specifically to the test experience – time, accoutrements of testing, isolation and scores.
Level of difficulty	Described the tests as 'easy' or 'hard/tricky'.
Learning outcomes	Referred to one or more of the positive learning outcomes 'good for thinking/learning', 'interesting/challenging', and/or described themselves as engaged in their learning; or the negative outcomes 'stops learning', 'rather be learning other things' and/or described themselves as disengaged.
Purpose	Representation and/or written description conveyed failure to see any purpose in the tests.
Physical responses	Explicitly represented and/or described one or more of the physical responses 'tired', 'sick/queasy', 'couldn't sleep', 'butterflies', 'shaking', 'sweating' and 'headache'.
Student metaphors	Contained a metaphorical representation and/or description; for example 'I felt like I was in a bottomless pit' and 'It's like a big horrible bomb'.
Content area	Referred directly to the reading, writing, language conventions or numeracy test. For example 'Language conventions was my favourite'.
Reiteration of teacher's views	Appeared to reiterate the views of their teacher. For example 'I think it is good because it helps me think better' – observed to be a common topic of conversation in that classroom.
Family	Depicted or referred to family members. For example 'My parents say don't worry about it'.
Teacher role	Depicted or referred to their teacher and/or the role they played during the testing process.
Fire	Depicted or described fire or burning the tests.

Key findings

Based on the combination of categories represented and/or described, each response was placed on a continuum from positive to negative.

The children's responses were considered positive if there were no negative themes within either the drawn or written elements. For example, the following response from a child in the lower SES school:

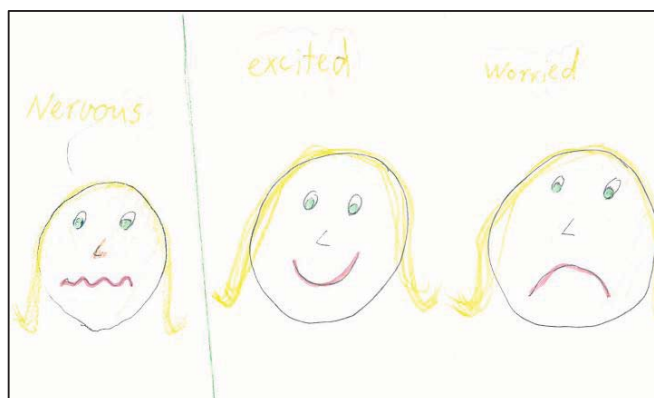


I think NAPLAN is ok. I like how it tests kids in their maths, writing, reading and language skills. I love seeing my test results (Year 5 student, lower SES school).

Figure 1. Example of a positive response

In this response, the child's facial expression and the 'thumbs up' are drawn in close proximity to the test which is clearly represented. This positive theme is supported by the written response which refers to NAPLAN as 'ok', her positive reference to each test and her positive reference to her forthcoming results.

The children's contributions were considered balanced if they displayed equivalent numbers of positive and negative themes. For example, the following response from a year 3 child in the higher SES school:



During NAPLAN I felt a bit nervous, worried and excited. I was nervous in NAPLAN because I didn't know how I was doing. I was worried in NAPLAN because some of the questions were hard. I was excited because I knew I was doing ok and I was enjoying it. I would like to do NAPLAN again, but only once every few years (Year 3 student, higher SES school).

Figure 2. Example of a balanced response

This response initially appears to be predominantly negative, with two of the three facial expressions representing negative emotion. However, the written element of the response reveals the two negative emotions of 'nervous' and 'worried' as well as the two positive emotions of 'excited' and 'enjoyed'. In addition, the negative category of 'hard' within the theme of 'level of difficulty' was counteracted by the positive 'I knew I was doing ok'. Finally this child noted that she would like to do NAPLAN again, however this was immediately followed with 'but only once every few years'.

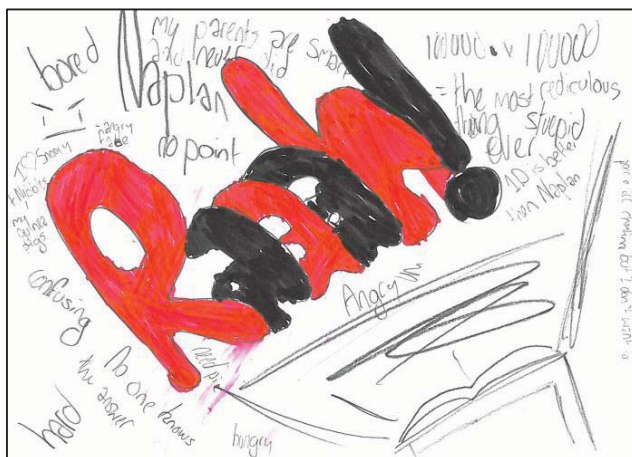
Part of the category of balanced responses is neutral responses. The children's contributions were placed in this category if no positive or negative themes were present. The following contribution provides an excellent example of a neutral response.



Even though I don't get the point of NAPLAN, it doesn't worry me because it is just another test that I only do once every two years. On the day of NAPLAN, I walk in, do the test and walk out. Just like it is a normal day (Year 7 student, higher SES school).

Figure 3. Example of a neutral response

Finally, the children's responses were considered negative if there were no positive themes present within either the drawn or written elements of the contribution. The example below was provided by a year 7 student in the higher SES school.



NAPLAN sucks. It's rubbish. It's stupid. There's no point (Year 7 student, higher SES school).

Figure 4. Example of a negative response

This response was not drawn per se; however the dramatic use of size and colour has brought the theme of anger, as represented in the word 'Raaah!' into the foreground. This overarching theme was accentuated by the large scribble under the word 'Angry' (immediately below the main focus of the response). Several additional themes, evidenced as minor because they remain in the background through the child's use of reduced size and lead pencil rather than colour were also present. For example 'disengaged' within the theme of 'negative learning outcomes' is evidenced in words and phrases such as 'bored', 'I [love] Snoopy and Nibbles my guinea pigs' and '1D is better than NAPLAN' (referring to the popular band 'One Direction').

Prevailing negativity

The contributions were overwhelmingly negative, with over 50% of students reporting an entirely negative response to their NAPLAN experience, compared with just over 10% who reported an entirely positive response. Data analysis revealed that negative responses were most prevalent among the year 7 students, with 70% of these students contributing an entirely negative response.

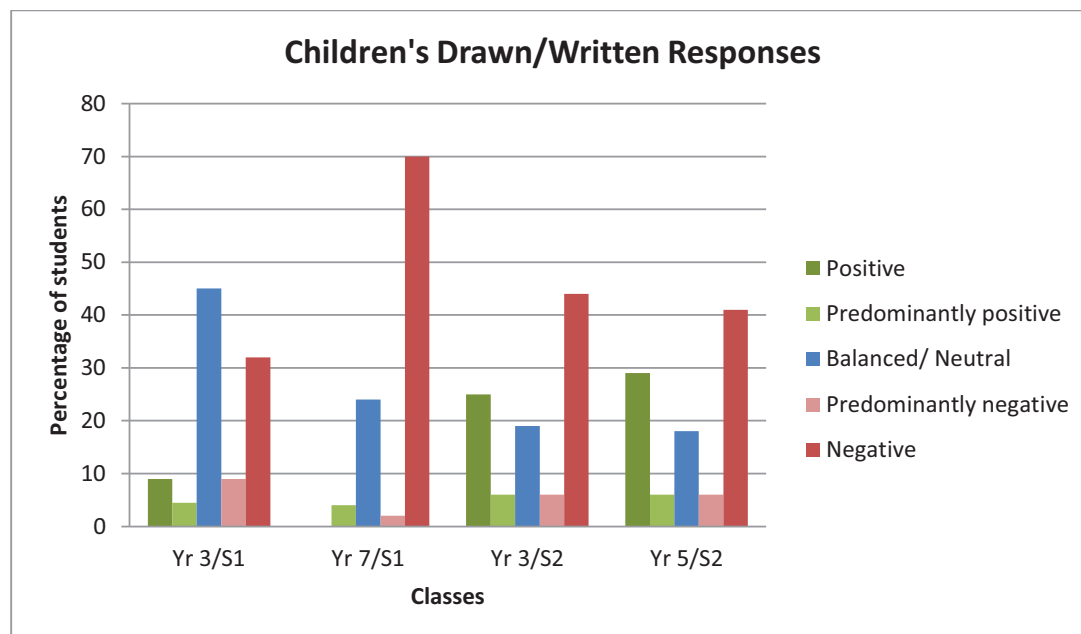
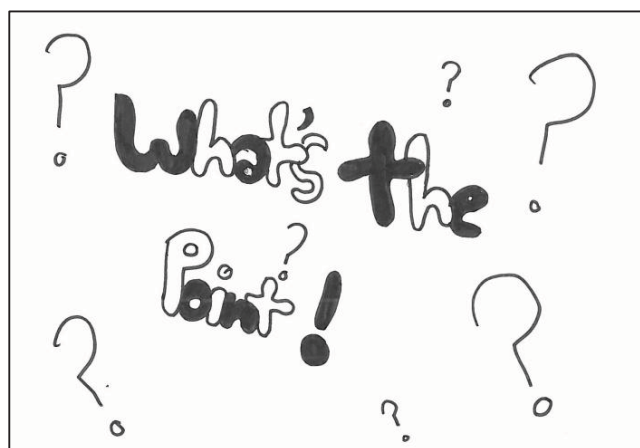


Figure 5. Percentage of children's responses on a continuum from positive to negative

Within this context of prevailing negativity, the theme of 'purpose', unique to the year 7 children, emerged as a significant one, with almost 40% of the children in this group failing to see any purpose in the tests. This was evidenced in comments from the children such as 'I always say to my mum before I do NAPLAN, what is the point of doing it?', 'I don't understand the point of NAPLAN as it doesn't go towards our report card or my high school [acceptance]', 'NAPLAN is just a boring test with no purpose' and the example below.

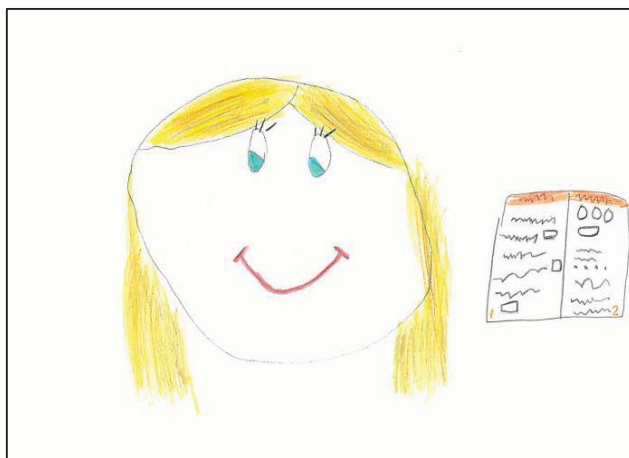


I don't get the point of NAPLAN. It wastes our school time and takes away time to do school work ... We should be learning new stuff rather than seeing what we know. What's the point of NAPLAN?
(Year 7 student, higher SES school).

Figure 6. Child's response indicating a failure to see any purpose in the tests

The dominant category: emotions

Analysis of the data revealed emotion as the dominant category, with 93 of the 100 children expressing emotion in their responses. Within these responses, there were 79 expressions of positive emotions. However 19 were expressions of happiness/relief that the tests were over. The adjusted total for expressions of positive emotion pertaining to the children's experience of NAPLAN is 60. The majority of these expressions of positive emotion came from the children in year 3. For example,



During NAPLAN I felt very happy. I was happy because I think I got a good score and it was fun. Some questions were easy and some were hard. Language conventions was my favourite (Year 3 student, higher SES school).

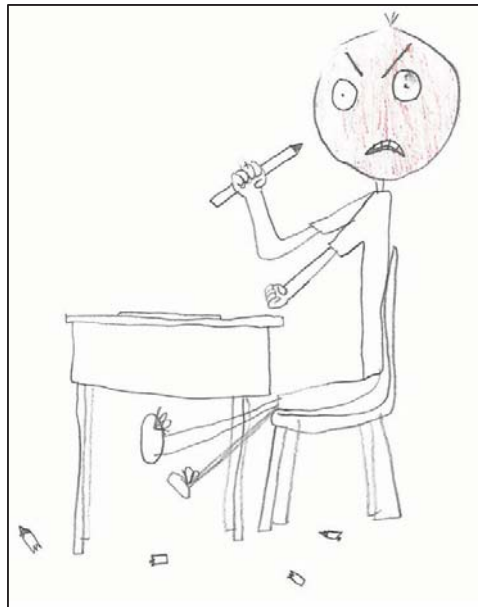
Figure 7. Example of positive emotion

By comparison, there were 130 expressions of negative emotions within the responses. Exemplars of responses incorporating the negative emotions of 'nervous' - the most commonly reported negative emotion, 'sad', 'angry' and 'stress/pressure' are provided below.



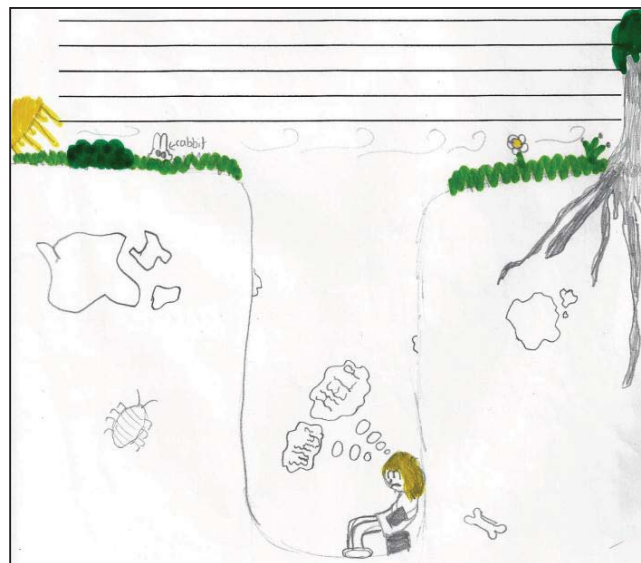
I don't like NAPLAN because it makes me really nervous because I don't want to be a fool and I wish I was good at everything (Year 5 student, lower SES school).

Figure 8. Example of a response representing and describing nervousness



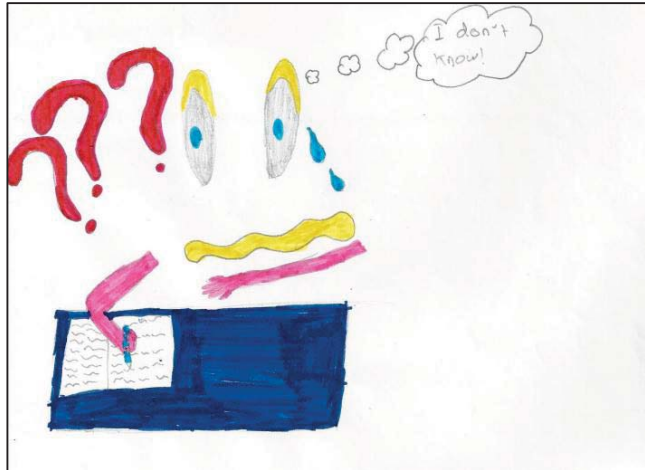
I did not like it and it was hard. I was so peeved. (Year 7 student, higher SES school).

Figure 9. Example of a response representing and describing anger



I felt like I was in a bottomless pit and I couldn't get out of my situation without help. It was hard and I thought asking for help would be useless. It made me feel sad lonely and isolated even though there were people at an arm's length away from me (Year 7, higher SES school).

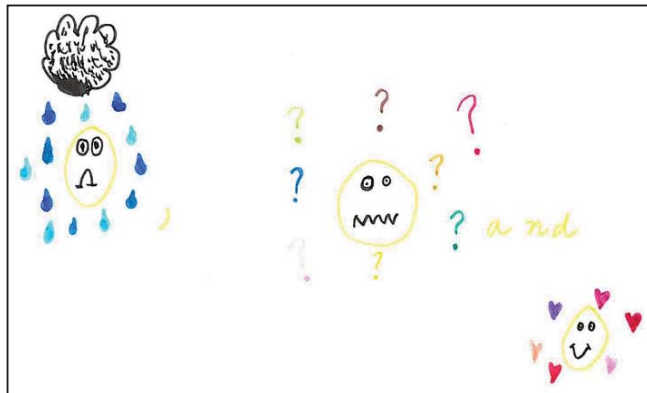
Figure 10. Example of a response representing and describing sadness



I didn't enjoy NAPLAN as it put pressure on me, making my life uncomfortable. I would rather do the tests in two days rather than three. When NAPLAN was over I felt like weights had been lifted off my back (Year 7 student, higher SES school).

Figure 11. Example of a response representing and describing pressure

The theme of emotions was particularly evident in the contributions of a quarter of the children, predominantly in the higher SES school, who represented and/or described their experience in temporal terms, with clear demarcations between expressions of their emotions before and after the tests.



In NAPLAN I felt happy at times and sad at others, also NAPLAN was sometimes tricky. Overall I didn't mind it, but people should think if children can do it (Year 3 student, higher SES school).

Figure 12. Example of a response representing emotions in temporal terms

Closely associated with emotions, is the category of physical responses. 'Tired' and 'sick/queasy' were the most commonly reported physical responses, however there were also reports of 'butterflies', 'sweating', 'shaking' as shown in the following example, 'lack of sleep' and 'headache'.



When I am scared I am shaking (Year 3 student, lower SES school).

Figure 13. Example of a response representing and describing 'shaking'

Several parents in the higher SES school also reported physical responses in their children as the result of emotional distress.

Her experience of the first lot of testing was very unpleasant. Day 1 got off the bus, burst into tears telling me how terrible she is. Day 2 getting ready for school, I find her sitting on the toilet in tears so anxious and nervous about the day ahead.

My daughter had nightmares and wet the bed in the nights leading up to NAPLAN which she hasn't had for in excess of 5 years!!!!

While these extreme physical responses were not described by the children, it must be recognised that these are sensitive personal issues which children may not wish to disclose to a relatively unfamiliar adult.

Critical incident

The following excerpt is taken from classroom observations recorded during the Numeracy test in year 5 in the lower SES school. It outlines a critical incident involving a child who required substantial cognitive, social and emotional support. The words and actions (in brackets) of the student are presented in normal font, while those of the teacher are in italics.

No! (Put his head on his desk) Not doing it! ... I HATE stupid NAPLAN! Aaaarrgh! Stupid NAPLAN. NO ... NOT DOING IT!! (Dropped test paper on the floor) ... (*Read instructions aloud to the class.*) YOU ALREADY TOLD US THAT ... We already know that!! Oh God, she said it twice now. You said it a million times. I KNOW!!!

(Started shading bubbles approximately 25 minutes into the test.) After 10 minutes:

Mrs [teacher], this is too hard! ... (*Read a question for him*) (Clearly struggled) This is hard! (Closed the booklet ... drawing lines on one of his fingers with his pencil ... pulled his jacket over his head and zipped it closed) ... It's too hard! ... (Punched himself repeatedly in the head ... started looking through this desk) (*Teacher rushed over and told him to close his desk; he cannot take anything out until the test is finished*) What's wrong with looking for something??

It was not apparent until after the tests were handed in that this was an instance of self-harm. He had not drawn lines on his finger with his pencil as had seemed to be the case during observations, but had made cuts with it. When asked about several larger cuts, he reported having taken scissors out of his desk to cause them.

Children's perceptions of NAPLAN as high-stakes

The data presented in figure 1 reveals that the highest number of balanced responses came from the year 3 children in the higher SES school. However in an apparent paradox, the focus group discussion with the children provided evidence that this group is most likely to perceive NAPLAN as high-stakes. The following excerpt follows the children's discussion of their belief that their futures strongly depend on how well they perform in their year 3 NAPLAN test.

Well I think it is important to do NAPLAN because if you do well in NAPLAN you get to go to good high schools. And after good high schools you go to university and to better jobs.

Well I agree, because let's say like, for us boys, if we didn't get to go to another school, we would have to stay here with the girls!

If you do well in NAPLAN, like, you can get good jobs, like, you can get lots and lots and lots of money, like doctors.

There is different tests and more important tests, but still, you should try your best to do NAPLAN. Because then you could never ever get a job and get money and maybe couldn't even get a house!

You don't need to do well in NAPLAN. It doesn't have an effect on your life. You won't be like, *homeless* if you don't do well in NAPLAN.

These children's belief that their futures depend on their NAPLAN performance in year 3 was echoed in the responses of the parents. These responses indicated a belief that elite high schools, which begin their intake in year 5 and therefore request children's year 3 NAPLAN results in addition to the most recent school report, utilise NAPLAN results as a basis for acceptance or exclusion. Parents' comments such as 'we hope to send [our son] to a Catholic all-boys school and it is very competitive to secure a place', provide further evidence that the year 3 children in the higher SES school are most likely to perceive NAPLAN as high-stakes.

Reflecting this perception of NAPLAN as high stakes, the children in this group had the highest frequency of reports of feeling nervous, for example,



During NAPLAN I felt nervous. I thought I would get bad scores. My scores would be so bad that everyone else got higher scores than me and I would have to repeat year 3 until I got better scores. I would not like it at all (Year 3 student, higher SES school).

Figure 14. Example of a response representing and describing nervousness regarding scores

The responses of the year 3 children in the lower SES school did not in and of themselves indicate that this group perceives NAPLAN as high-stakes. However 50% of these children's responses were marked 'Not For Publishing' ('NFP') at the specific request of the children, who did not want their contribution shown to anyone. This compares to only 9% of year 3 children in the higher SES school. In addition, 44% of this group contributed an entirely negative response (example below) compared to 32% in the higher SES school.

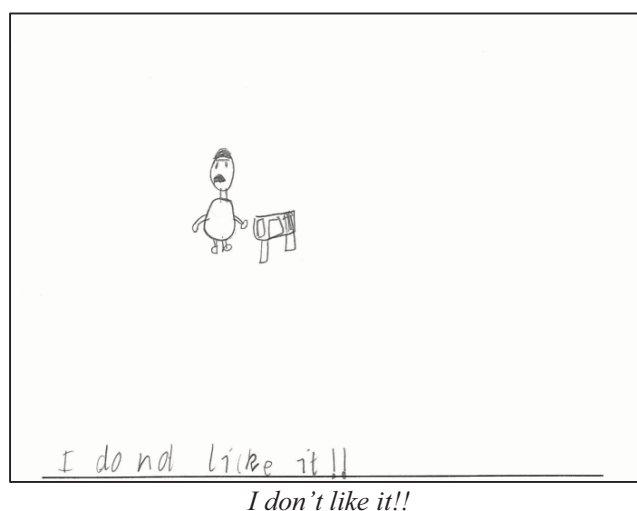


Figure 15. Example of a response from a year 3 child in the lower SES school

Conclusion

These findings align with current research which indicates that while not all children experience NAPLAN as a negative event, the tests are having a significant impact on primary school-aged children. Generalisability of the data should be approached with caution as while this case may offer theoretical insights into how we might understand the impact of NAPLAN on children in other schools, it cannot represent the specificity of similar experiences in other contexts.

The prevailing negativity of the children's responses is nevertheless cause for several concerns. Firstly, and of greatest concern is the critical incident, which was unexpected given the high level of mediation provided by BCE, the school and the teachers. While this child's injuries were minor and did not require medical attention, this incident highlights the urgent need to consider the impact of the tests on students who experience cognitive, social and/or emotional difficulties. Secondly, the disproportionate number of negative emotional responses and the reports of the associated physical responses indicate that NAPLAN is having a detrimental impact upon children's health and well-being. This highlights the corresponding need for further research to examine the impact of NAPLAN in schools which do not experience the systemic mediation provided by education systems such as BCE.

While NAPLAN was not designed to be a high-stakes test, the belief of the year 3 children in the higher SES school that their NAPLAN results may impact upon the rest of their lives, and the reluctance of the year 3 children in the lower SES school to share their contributions indicates that many children nevertheless appear to perceive NAPLAN as high-stakes. Research which has repeatedly confirmed the negative impact of high-stakes testing regimes indicates the need for further research to investigate and evaluate the ways in which NAPLAN data are being used by politicians, the media, education systems, teachers and parents; all of whom contribute to the context in which children learn and are evaluated.

NAPLAN is a recent development in Australian education, founded on laudable policy intentions of equity and social justice as well as the benefit of hindsight gained through the experiences of England and the US. However the prevailing negativity of the children's responses indicates that NAPLAN is perceived by many children as high-stakes and is consequently having a detrimental impact on the health and well-being of primary school-aged children. Research which has repeatedly confirmed the strong symbiotic relationships between negative emotional responses, high-stakes testing regimes and impoverished learning outcomes indicates that NAPLAN is a counterproductive strategy for improving learning outcomes.

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